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Aphrodisiac Use in Pre-Columbian Aztec and Inca Cultures

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Aphrodisiacs have been utilized in most cultures, often fairly extensively. For those older cultures where sexuality was a taboo subject, little evidence remains about such related matters as sex-enhancing drugs, irrespective of the extent of their adoption. Even within cultures where sexual taboos were less pronounced, surviving records make it difficult to understand exactly how aphrodisiacs were used. The ancient cultures of the Near East, as well as the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Arabs illustrate this point, for all made use of a considerable quantity of sexual stimulants, but in ways that are not always clear.[1]

Like the aforementioned peoples, pre-Columbians used aphrodisiacs, as well as a number of anaphrodisiacs, to modulate sexuality. If they could not gain the love or affection of another in ordinary ways or by magic, they secretly applied aphrodisiac plant or animal substances to change the mind of the desired person. Modern knowledge of these practices within the ancient cultures of the Americas relies heavily on the writings of sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers, who sometimes provided very detailed accounts. Although most of these chroniclers were Roman Catholics whose ideas about sexuality and morality influenced their observations of indigenous behavior, they recorded enough information to convey some clear concepts about sexual practices, including the adoption of aphrodisiacs. This essay compiles discussions from these early Spanish sources in order to provide a starting point for further research about the role of aphrodisiacs in pre-Columbian cultures of the Western Hemisphere.

The following pages will consider the aphrodisiacs of botanical and animal origin, focusing especially upon their use among the Aztecs and the Incas, because most of the sources deal with these cultures. This is not as

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[1] P. V. Taberner, *Aphrodisiacs: The Science and the Myth* (London, 1985), 25–40.

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restrictive as it might seem, for both peoples incorporated the knowledge and achievements of previous or coexisting cultures into their own. Consequently, the adoption of aphrodisiacs by the Aztecs and Incas may to a large degree be representative of practices in other pre-Columbian cultures.

With regard to sexual morality, the Aztecs and the Incas resembled one another in many ways. Procreation was central to both cultures; having children added to an individual's importance and esteem in society. The promotion of large families was not uncommon in cultures where many soldiers were required for war, and where successful competition depended on population size. Childlessness was a disaster for a married couple. Both cultures prosecuted people who committed adultery (although this was differentiated from concubinage and sex before marriage—see below) or indulged in sexual aberrations; overt homosexuality and wearing the clothes of the opposite sex were punishable by death. Prostitution was frowned upon (although permitted), and prostitutes and their clients were despised. Sex before marriage was permitted, and when a male could afford to support an additional household, he could take a concubine, although here some rules had to be followed.

In some respects the Aztecs and Incas might seem to have been chaste societies, but their mythology suggests another reality. They were very religious peoples who venerated a number of gods, including some associated with sexuality. Among the many deities revered by the Aztecs was Xochiquetzal, goddess of flowers and of love. According to an Aztec myth, she lived in a paradise as wife of one of the most important gods. In that paradise grew a tree called *xochitlicacan,* the fruits of which possessed aphrodisiac properties. After Xochiquetzal ate this fruit, she was easily seduced. In consequence, she was expelled from paradise, while at the same time the tree withered and broke in two.[2] In addition to Xochiquetzal, the Aztecs worshipped a goddess of sexual affairs and lust, Tlazolteotl. This goddess was primarily associated with sexual desires and was believed to provoke lasciviousness and promote sexual indulgences. When people had committed such sins, the goddess possessed the power to forgive them if they confessed to the priests. But if these sins were not confessed, the goddess chastised sinners by inflicting them with diseases of the sex organs. She was sometimes considered a combination of four goddesses and known under different names, associated with sexual appetites. One of her names, Tlaelqani, means 'eater of dirty things'. The Incas did not have such a goddess, but the pre-Inca Huarochiri culture believed in a goddess of sensuality, called Chaupi Amka, about whom little is known.

[2] B. C. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin, 1979), 77–78; Diego Camargo Muñoz, *Historia de Tlaxcala* (Mexico City, 1978), 155.

The indigenous languages of America contain some words associated with aphrodisiacs. In the Aztec language, Nahuatl, the word *tetlacuiti* means 'something that makes lascivious'. In Peru the word *muxallu* has been translated as 'something for the virile member'. *Lava-lava* is the Aymara name for a bird with aphrodisiac properties; among other things, the word *lava* means 'penis', while *lavayi* refers to an erection.

AZTEC APHRODISIACS

Spanish writers from the time of the Conquest have provided more information about the Aztecs than about the other pre-Columbian cultures. For a general overview, the work of Bernardino de Sahagún is of outstanding importance; he gathered his information directly from Aztec informants. For a description of plants, animals, and minerals, the work of Hernández is particularly significant and detailed. His volume discusses about fifteen hundred plants with medicinal properties, some of them aphrodisiac. Hernández, too, compiled his information from indigenous physicians, but in contrast with Sahagún's work, his account reflects his European values quite extensively. With regard to aphrodisiac plants, he rarely said more about a species than that it "excites the venereal appetite," and quite often that attribute was only one of the plant's potential applications.

The Aztecs knew many aphrodisiacs of botanical origin and some of animal origin. All the Aztec aphrodisiac plants known to these sources are given in table 1, with their references. In a few cases, the exclusive use or principal property of the plant was to whet the sexual appetite. Aztecs customarily called a plant after its principal property, and different plants could have the same name when they had the same application. That is the reason that two different plants share the name *tlaquauhtilizpatli*, translated by Hernández as 'medicine for exciting venereal appetite'. The naming of a plant after its application provides a useful index to its major use. There is another interesting aspect in naming patterns: the addition of *patli* means 'medicine'. Apparently the Aztecs saw these sexual stimulants as beneficial to health.

Atextli was a kind of chocolate beverage, reported by Hernández to be an aphrodisiac. The Aztecs consumed a number of different chocolate beverages, but only *atextli* was described as having aphrodisiac qualities. It is therefore unlikely that the aphrodisiac action was due to the cacao (or *cacahoatl*); more probably it was the result of an additional plant that was blended into this drink. The origins of its stimulating qualities remain unclear. The *atextli* was made of cacao and maize to which were added *mecaxochitl*, *xochinacaztli* and *tlilxochitl* (*Vanilla planifolia*). None of the latter plants, however, was credited with being an aphrodisiac.

Besides the cacao-*cacahoatl*, another plant which became popular among Europeans was associated with sexually stimulating characteristics: the peanut. It is ironic (and confusing) that the general name for peanut was the same as that for one of the cacao species, *tlalcacáhoatl,* whose name literally means 'small *cacahoatl'.* The Aztecs identified a vast number of peanut types, but Spanish chronicles mentioned aphrodisiac properties for only one kind of *tlalcacáhoatl.* Observers reported that excessive use of *tlalcacáhoatl* was undesirable; it caused headaches.

The *holquáhuitl* was a tree that produced a resin called *holli* or *hule.* One of its major uses was to provide rubber balls for the Aztecs' ritual ball game, but it had a number of other applications as well. It was a highly prized medicine, and it was an aphrodisiac.

Many of the aphrodisiac plants were administered orally, mostly in a drink, to obtain the desired effect. Hernández reported that the *cutiriqui*

Table 1. Aztec Aphrodisiacs of Botanical Origin

Aztec Name	Description[1]	Reference[2]
Ahoacaquáhuitl	*Persea americana*	H.1.ciii
Apoyomatli	*Cyperus articulatus*	H.3.xcvi
Atextli	Cacao beverage	H.6.lxxxvii
Atonahuizpatli[3]		H.3.cxcii
Cempoalxóchitl	*Tagetes erecta*	H.4.clxxix
Cempoalpatli		H.7.civ
Chiantzotzolto[4]		H.2.lxiv
Chichicahoazton[5]		H.3.l
Chilli	*Capsicum annuum*	Acosta,H.3.cliii
Cozolmécatl[6]	*Smilax* sp.	H.5.lxxii
Cutiriqui[7]		H.6.xxxii
Holquáhuitl	*Castilla elastica*	H.9.lvii
Matlalitztic	*Commelina coelestis*	H.10.cx
Ololiuhqui	*Rivea corymbosa*	H.12.i
Tencacálotl		H.18.ci
Teonanácatl	*Psilocybe* sp.	S.11.vii
Tlaelpatli[8]		H.19.xl
Tlaquauhtilizpatli[9]		H.19.xxix
Tlalcacáhoatl		H.6.lxxxix
Tlalpayatzin		H.17.xxxiii
Tlatonilatolli	Maize beverage	H.6.xliv
Xocoxóchitl		H.20.xi
Yauhtli	*Tagetes lucida*	H.7.civ

[1] The botanical identification is usually taken from Martínez, 1979.

[2] H = Hernández.book.chapter; S = Sahagún.book.chapter.

[3] Also known as *oquechpatli.*

[4] Also known as *tecamactlactlatzin, mecapatli, quauhtilizpatli.*

[5] Also known as *chichicahoaztic, cohayelli, tlilpoton.*

[6] Also known as *olcacatzin.*

[7] Also known as *tlaquauhtilizpatli.* The plant differs from that mentioned below with the same name.

[8] Translated by Hernández as "venereal medicine."

[9] Besides maize, unnamed spices were added.

was ingested as an aphrodisiac, and that it had the additional benefits of eliminating envy and reestablishing love in a married couple. The *tlalpayatzin,* however, was applied differently: the loins were flogged with this plant. One of the *tlaquauhtilizpatli* species was either taken orally or applied externally on the sexual organ.

A number of the aphrodisiacs given in table 1 possessed psychoactive properties which were particularly important for the Aztecs. The *yauhtli* was reported to have these effects, and the morning glory *ololiuhqui* and the mushrooms *teonanácatl* were widely used hallucinogens. Some hallucinogens described in colonial times as aphrodisiacs were probably of pre-Columbian origin. Among these were *toloatzin* (*Datura* sp.),[3] *poyomatli,*[4] the cactus *peyotl,*[5] *tecomaxochitl,*[6] and *colorines* (*Erythrina* spp.).[7] The *teonanácatl* was used by a few groups among the Aztecs, including prostitutes, although it is not known whether these mushrooms were eaten by prostitutes or their clients, or whether for their hallucinogenic effects or to enhance the libido. Prostitutes also used the *poyomatli* herb, perhaps as a perfume (the *poyomatli* was an odorous plant) or perhaps for its aphrodisiac properties.[8]

While botanical remedies were more numerous, aphrodisiacs derived from animals and insects were mentioned more frequently by the Spanish writers and might have been more important. According to the descriptions of Francisco Hernández, the aphrodisiacs of animal origin, which are listed in table 2, were more potent than those of botanical origin. Among these aphrodisiacs the *mazacoatl* appears most often.[9] The *mazacoatl* or deersnake was a large snake that had two protuberances on the head, giving the reptile some resemblance to a deer. These protuberances were thought to be quite effective aphrodisiacs, but also very dangerous. A person who relied upon this remedy could become overstimulated and die. The *Florentine Codex* warned against a tincture based on this substance: "He who drinks too much continually erects his virile member and constantly

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[3] V. A. Reko, *Magische Gifte: Rausch- und Betäubungsmittel der Neuen Welt* (Stuttgart, 1938), 114–15.

[4] G. Aguirre Beltrán, *Medicina y magia. El proceso de aculturación en la estructura colonial* (Mexico, 1987), 302, 318.

[5] Ibid.

[6] R. Heffern, *Secrets of the Mind-altering Plants of Mexico* (New York, 1975), 101.

[7] Reko, 126–39.

[8] *Florentine Codex. General History of the Things of New Spain,* trans. A. J. O. Anderson and C. E. Dibble (Salt Lake City, 1950–1969), Book 10, 55–56.

[9] Francisco Hernández, *Historia natural de Nueva España.* In *Obras completas* (Mexico City, 1959), Tratado 3-XX; Bernardo de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Mexico City, 1969); Samuel Champlain, *Narrative of a Voyage to the West Indies and Mexico in the Years 1599–1602* (London, 1859), 33; Bernabe Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo* (Madrid, 1964), 9-XXXVIII; Juan de Cárdenas, *Problemas y secretos maravillosos de las Indias* (Mexico City, 1980), 69.

TABLE 2. Aztec Aphrodisiacs of Animal Origin

Aztec Name	Description	Reference[1]
Acaltetepon[2]	Lizard	H.367
Axólotl	Salamander	H.391
Hoitztlacuatzin	Porcupine	Cobo, 9-LXIII; H.299
Mazacoatl	Horned rattlesnake	Sahagún,11-V
Temolin	Beetle	H.387
Tlalómitl	Worm	LA.11-65
Tlacuatzin	Opossum	H.299
Tlalmazacóatl[3]	Small horned snake	LA.11-61

[1] H = Hernández.vol. II page no. LA = López Austin.vol. no.-page no.
[2] Also known as *temacuilacahuya.*
[3] Also known as *tzumpilacahuaztli.*

ejects his semen, and dies of lasciviousness."[10] The *tlalmazacóatl,* also called *tzumpilacahuatzli,* was a smaller snake which emerged in large numbers during the rain. It had a rattle and two protuberances like the *mazacoatl.* The effect of drugs made from both species of snake was quite the same: they stimulated lust but could result in death if the dose were too large.

The *temolin,* a large beetle, possessed a horn-like protuberance which contained a strong aphrodisiac and was very toxic. Bernabe Cobo observed that a number of persons died as a consequence of using remedies made from this beetle.[11] Other reports that described the highly stimulating properties of the horns of unnamed beetles probably also referred to the *temolin.*[12] The *temolin* is not identical with the Spanish fly: the latter beetle is differently shaped, has no horn, and the whole body of the insect was (and is) used. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that the active ingredient of Spanish fly—cantharidin—is also the active agent of *temolin.* The *temolin* and Spanish fly are both highly poisonous.

References to other aphrodisiac animals appear less frequently in the accounts. The quills of the *hoitztlacuatzin* (porcupine) were pulverized, and the resulting product was used as an aphrodisiac and as a medicine against a variety of ailments.[13] According to Hernández, the flesh of the back of the *acaltetepon,* a lizard with a terrifying appearance, could have an extraordinarily strong aphrodisiac effect; he compared its flesh with that of the crocodile.[14] Sahagún's informants mentioned the *tlalómitl* for its ability to cause an erection.[15]

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[10] *Florentine Codex,* book 6, XXII.

[11] Cobo, 9-XIX.

[12] *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI: Guatemala,* ed. René Acuña (Mexico City, 1982), 265.

[13] Cobo, 9-LXIII; Hernández, Tratado primero, VI.

[14] Hernández, Tratado tercero, I.

[15] A. López Austin, "Descripción de medicinas en textos dispersos del Libro XI de los Codices matritense y florentino," *Estudios de cultura nahuatl* 11 (1974), 65.

TABLE 3. Inca Aphrodisiacs

Inca name	Description	Reference
Chichi	Insect larva	Cobo, 7-VIII
Chutarpo	Plant	SPY, 289[1]
Cuchuchu	Plant: *Baccharis* sp.	Cobo, 4-XXI
Musullu[2]	Small worm	Cobo, 9-XXII
Pencácuc	Plant	Cobo, 4-LVIII
Siaya	Plant	Losa, 109
Tocoracas	Plant: *Oxalis crenata*	Losa, 201
Uchu	Plant: *Capsicum annuum*	Acosta, 114
(?)	Porcupine	Cobo, 9-LXIII
Yanta-yanta[3]	Bird	Calancha, 144
Ysaño[4]	Plant: *Tropaeolum tuberosum*	Losa, 133
Ytapallo	Plant: *Urtica* spp.	Losa, 133

[1] SPY = Santa Cruz Pachacuti Yamqui.

[2] Also known as *muxallu.*

[3] Also known as *lava-lava.*

[4] Also known as *isaña* or *aña* and described by others (Cobo, 47; Garcilaso, 48) as an aphrodisiac.

The Aztecs believed firmly in magic and employed it to excite the love of another who was unwilling to respond to the usual gestures. To induce feelings of love, medical incantations were spoken, and in some cases the goddess Xochiquetzal was invoked.[16] While it is not known whether aphrodisiacs were involved in these magic acts, drug use has been reported to have accompanied the incantation in other medical situations.

INCA APHRODISIACS

The list of plants described as aphrodisiacs is much smaller for Peru than for Mexico. This evidence does not necessarily mean that the Incas utilized fewer aphrodisiacs, because the descriptions of plants with medicinal and other properties are much less complete for their region than for the Aztecs. Table 3 summarizes the products of botanical and animal origin for which the Spanish reported aphrodisiac use in Peru.

The Peruvian *uchu* and the Mexican *chilli* were different names for the same plant, which was believed to possess aphrodisiac properties. Since this pepper was used frequently to flavor food, its use was widespread. José de Acosta warned about the excessive use of the *uchu* (or *ají* as he called it, employing the name for pepper used on Hispaniola), which was especially popular among young men. He considered it damaging to health, especially spiritual health, because of its effect on sexual desire.[17]

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[16] Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, *Tratado de las supersticiones y costumbres gentílicas que aún se encuentran entre los indios de la Nueva España,* and Jacinto de la Serna, *Manual de Ministros de Indios para el conocimiento de sus idolatrías, y extirpación de ellas,* both in *Tratado de las idolatrías, supersticiones, dioses, ritos, hechicerías y otras costumbres gentílicas de las razas aborígenes de México* (Mexico City, 1953), 109, 269.

Cobo described the aphrodisiac properties of the plant *pencácuc,* which existed in a male and a female form. He stated that the roots of the male and female forms of the plant had opposite effects: "The male plant . . . has another strange property. When its root is eaten it incites an extremely strong lust feeling. The remedy to appease this fire of lust is to eat the root of the female plant; its action is immediate. This peculiar effect is well known to the Indians, especially in the province of Chachapoyas, where much of this herb grows."[18]

Observers described a similar relationshipe between the male and female forms of a plant called *chutarpo* (or *huanarpo*). The male form, *chutarpo,* was known to act as an aphrodisiac; the female form, *huanarpo,* acted in the reverse way and could be used as an anaphrodisiac.[19] Given the resemblance between biochemical pathways in the male and female forms of the same species, there is a strong chance that these effects were at least partly psychological.

In addition to the plants given in table 3, a colonial source mentioned some plants, such as the *olluco,* the *paltas,* and the *tocoracas,* which "caused an increase of sperm" and thus acted as a kind of aphrodisiac.[20] In later sources the fruit of the plant *algarroba* was noted as a widely known aphrodisiac.[21] The Spanish name *algarroba* denotes a number of plants, among which is a *Mimosa* species.[22] It might be that the indigenous name *pencácuc* is identical with this *algarroba,* though it is not certain. There are some plants which were used by the Peruvian Indians as aphrodisiacs in later times about which no information is available for Inca times. But it seems likely that their later use is a survival from an earlier period. In Peru the *chamico (Datura stramonium)* is believed to possess aphrodisiac properties; in the early nineteenth century the inhabitants of the Andean highlands used a beverage containing *chicha* (a light alcoholic drink) and *chamico* as an aphrodisiac for women.[23]

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[17] José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (Madrid, 1954), 4-XX.

[18] Cobo, 4-LVIII.

[19] Juan de Santa Cruz Pachacuti Yamqui, *Antigüedades deste reyno del Perú* (Madrid, 1968), 289.

[20] Gregorio de Losa Avila y Palomares, *De los árboles; frutos; plantas; aves y de otras cosas medicinales ... tiene este reyno* (La Paz, 1983), 90, 93, 117.

[21] W. Golden Mortimer, *History of Coca* (San Francisco, 1974), 210.

[22] J. Soukup, *Vocabulario de los nombres vulgares de la flora Peruana* (Lima, 1970).

[23] F. Cabieses, *Apuntes de medicina tradicional. La racionalización de lo irracional* (Lima, 1933), 509; J. M. Cooper, *Stimulants and Narcotics,* vol. 5 of *Handbook of South American Indians* (Washington, 1949), 555.

The *yanta-yanta* bird was considered to be a highly effective sexual stimulant, but most of the evidence relates only to a side-effect: it was highly toxic. For that reason it was used to cause a painful and slow death.[24] The *musullu* was a small worm that lived in only two types of trees: the *molle* or the *tipa*. The worm, which was probably a butterfly larva, possessed highly caustic properties, and was used for that reason against fleshy growths (i.e., to burn off warts or tumors). That it could cause blisters did not prevent the Indians from applying it to the virile member to produce an erection.[25]

The *chiche* or *chichi* was an insect larva used by the Indians not only to induce feelings of lust but also as a diuretic.[26] In addition, the *chichi* was very popular among the Incas as the base of an appetizing condiment. The chronicler Martín de Morua recorded that several types of worms were used to increase the potency of the male,[27] and it seems likely that the *musullu* and the *chichi* were among them. The porcupine provided another sexual stimulant; the powdered quills, taken orally in water, were believed to be efficacious, according to Cobo.[28]

Although there is evidence that Incas sometimes resorted to the use of aphrodisiacs to win a reluctant lover, in the Inca culture reliance upon drugs was secondary to reliance upon the supernatural. When all ordinary methods failed to gain the affection of the desired person, the love-lorn individual might consult a special class of sorcerer.[29] The sorcerers created powerful objects, called *huacanquis,* to be carried; the objects were believed to attract women or men, according to individual wishes.[30] According to Brundage, a *huacanqui* can be seen as a *huaca* (an object with supernatural power), a *huaca* of desire. The *huacanquis* could be made of birds' feathers or other materials. Cobo mentioned in one place that the *huacanquis* were magic objects made from feathers, but in another he described a *huacanqui* as an insect used for the same purpose. Morua also mentioned a *huacanqui,* describing it vaguely as a type of worm.[31] Possibly the insect and the worm were aphrodisiacs, intended to reinforce the magic act; the underlying idea was that someone with an urgent sex drive was particularly well prepared to enter into a relationship, compared to someone who lacked such desires.

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[24] Antonio de la Calancha, *Corónica moralizada del orden de San Augustín en el Perú* (Lima, 1974), 144.

[25] Cobo, 9-XXII.

[26] Cobo, 7-VIII.

[27] Martín de Morua, *Los orígenes de los Incas* (Lima, 1946), 159.

[28] Cobo, 9-LXIII.

[29] Cobo, 13-XXXVI; Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *El Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno,* ed. J. V. Murra and R. Adorno (Mexico City, 1980), 274.

[30] Cobo, 13-XXXVI; Juan Polo de Ondegardo, *Informaciones acerca de la religión y gobierno de los Incas* (Lima, 1916), 196.

[31] Brundage, 189; Cobo, 9-IV; Morua, 159.

ANAPHRODISIACS

In addition to aphrodisiacs, pre-Columbians knew of some anaphrodisiacs. In Mexico the *huexólotl* could be utilized in malevolent practices. The crest of the male bird, which was supposed to be an anaphrodisiac, would cause its victim to be unable to produce an erection.[32] About the *acueyo* Hernández said only that it inhibited venereal appetite.[33] Sahagún's informants mentioned that the flesh of the ocelot had anaphrodisiac properties, being quite useful to help widowers forget their wives.[34]

The Inca rulers fed *añu (Tropaeolum tuberosum)*, also called *isaña*, to soldiers who were engaged in warfare to help them forget their wives and thus improve their fighting spirit.[35] Garcilaso reported that the anaphrodisiac action of the plant was well known to the Indians.[36] Some of those who prided themselves on their sexual prowess used to eat the root while holding a little stick in one hand, apparently to challenge the root's power. The *piliyuio* was a plant with a number of medicinal applications; it was used against gout, stomach complaints, urinary troubles, ailments of the liver, and it was a powerful purgative. But its effectiveness as a remedy had a disadvantage: even small amounts of an infusion of the seeds would extinguish all sexual fire.[37] Another name for the *piliyuio* was *siquis* or (in Aymara) *chamcoroma*.

APHRODISIACS AND ANAPHRODISIACS IN CRIMINAL PRACTICES

Many chroniclers have described the criminal use of plant and animal products by the Aztecs as well as the Incas.[38] The secret administration of fatal substances made it possible to escape the severe punishments which both cultures meted out to murderers. Slow-acting products were popular poisons because the culprit could not be easily traced. Aphrodisiacs were among the products described as poisons for criminal practices. Those aphrodisiacs which gave a long-lasting overstimulation, such as the *mazacoatl,* were especially popular. In these cases death was typically not instantaneous, which allowed the offender a chance to gloat over his victim.

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[32] Sahagún, 11-II.

[33] Hernández, 3-XLI.

[34] López Austin, 213.

[35] Cobo, 4-XVIII.

[36] El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru* (Austin, 1966), 501.

[37] Losa, 99.

[38] J. G. R. Elferink, J. A. Flores, and C. D. Kaplan, "The Use of Plants and Other Natural Products for Malevolent Practices among the Aztecs and their Successors," *Estudios de cultura nahuatl* 24 (1994), 27–47.

In Mexico, as mentioned above, the *huexólotl* was used in criminal practices, to render a victim impotent.[39] Aztec prostitutes used aphrodisiacs to drum up business, with potentially hazardous consequences. Sahagún provided a vivid description of this application when he recorded the advice of an upper-class father to his son who was going to be married. The father warned his son against all types of persons who might cause harm:

> [E]special[ly] the bad women . . . [who] often add substances to the meal or in a drink to provoke lasciviousness, and these substances not only harm the body and the spirit, but they also kill . . . the person who eats and drinks. . . . Those who take the flesh of the mazacoatl, which is a snake with horns, can copulate with four or five or even more women, and several times with each of them. The persons who do so will die. [B]e careful, my boy, if someone you do not trust gives you something to eat or drink, be suspicious and do not eat or drink before the one who gave it to you has taken from it.[40]

The Incas used several plants and animals as aphrodisiacs or as anaphrodisiacs that could be applied in malevolent practices. In Peru the flesh of the *yanta-yanta* bird was considered as a highly effective sexual stimulant. But its use was not without danger, and for that reason it was disguised in food or drink and given secretly to one's enemies. As a consequence, they died slowly.[41]

Evidence indicates that both the Aztecs and the Incas made significant use of aphrodisiacs. The Spanish observers sometimes expressed disdain for those who used them to stimulate lustful feelings; however, they described them openly and without reservations. This attitude is reflected in the work of Farfán, a chronicler who described Mexican medicine but wrote mostly for the Spaniards.[42] He discussed male impotence and its treatment without hesitation, concerned only with treating the ailment in the most effective way. Because the Spanish chroniclers were able to gather information about many plants and animals that were used as aphrodisiacs, presumably the same openness was present among the pre-Columbian Indians.

To gauge the effectiveness of the pre-Columbian aphrodisiacs, we must rely on the reports of Spanish observers since no modern investigations have been carried out. In nearly all reports of aphrodisiac use, the chronicler cites the indigenous population as the source.[43] The fact that indigenous people supplied such information does not necessarily warrant its accuracy. Little information is given about the potency of some aphrodisiacs, and the descriptions of others suggest they acted in a largely magical way. But it cannot be denied that some aphrodisiacs had the desired effect; for example, some of those that were used in criminal practices are known to cause death from overstimulation.

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[39] Sahagún, 11-II.

[40] Ibid., 6-XXII.

[41] Calancha, 144.

[42] Agustín Farfán, *Tractado breve de medicina* (Madrid, 1944), 231–34.

Other plants available to pre-Columbian cultures have been held at various times to be aphrodisiacs. Among these are the tomato, the potato, tobacco, and coca. Tobacco was used in pre-Columbian Central America for its psychoactive properties, and coca was used by Inca nobles before the Conquest and by all Incas after the Conquest for a variety of medicinal purposes.[44] But neither the Aztecs nor the Incas attributed aphrodisiac properties to any of these, and Europeans ceased to do so once they were in common use.[45]

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[43] One exception to this is the bezoar stone, which was described by Hernández (Tratado primero, XXII) as an aphrodisiac without reference to indigenous information. Given the stone's popularity as a cure-all in Europe, his statements are probably more indicative of its use in Europe than in the Americas.

[44] J. G. R. Elferink, "The Narcotic and Hallucinogenic Use of Tobacco in Pre-Columbian Central America," *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 7 (1983), 111–22; R. T. Martin, "The Role of Coca in the History, Religion, and Medicine of South American Indians," *Economic Botany* 24 (1970), 422–37.

[45] Several psychoactive substances have been reported as having aphrodisiac properties. Among these ethanol is the best known, but also included are cannabis, cocaine, opium, nicotine, LSD, and MDA (3, 4-methylenedioxymphetamine). (See Taberner, 173–214.) While the direct aphrodisiac effect of some of these substances is highly questionable, their ability to reduce sexual constraints might have an indirect effect.